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Outlook

Politics of Wheat Deal Gives U.S. Upper Hand

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IT HAS BEEN argued that the wheat deal with the Soviet Union is desirable on humantarian grounds. If Russian people are starving, the United States should not stand back, said former President Truman on the radio, and he has been echoed by some clergymen and by various people of good will.

Others have suggested that the wheat deal is purely a matter of economics. The Russians need our wheat; we can use their gold. Their food needs will be met; our food surpluses will be diminished. We both gain equally.

The humanitarian argument can be dismissed quickly. First of all, there is no famine in Russia. The Soviet people are not starving, and the government has not lost all of its ability to meet a food crisis. It could certainly divert some of its resources from heavy industry to better agricultural management, and it is still capable of providing the basic staples to meet Russian needs.

Even if all the Western countries were to refuse wheat to Russia, no Russian would starve because of it. There is no doubt, however, that certain kinds of foods would be in short supply, and this would create considerable social and political difficulties for the Soviet government.

'Outrageous' Approach

THE ECONOMIC argument is more complex. The simple equation of profit and trade is deeply rooted in the American tradition, and it is not easy to convince an American that the Soviet approach to the problem is somewhat different. Yet as George Kennan has amply demonstrated in his book "Russia and the West," the Soviet approach to the problem of trade is a highly political one.

Writing about the Soviet attitude toward the West in the very early 1920s, Kennan thus projected the Soviet reasoning on the subject of trade with the West:

"We despise you. We consider that you should be swept from the earth as governments and physically destroyed as individuals. We reserve the right, in our private if not in our official capacities, to do what we can to bring this about: to revile you publicly, to do everything within our power to detach your own people from their loyalty to you and their confidence in you, to subvert your armed forces and to work for your downfall in favor of the Communist dictatorship.

"But since we are not strong enough to destroy you today—since an interval must unfortunately elapse before we can give you the coup de grace—we want you during this interval to trade with us . . . An outrageous demand? Perhaps. But you will accept it nevertheless.

"You will accept it because you are not free agents, because you are slaves to your own capitalist appetites, because when profit is involved, you have no pride, no principles, no honor. In the blindness that characterizes declining and perishing classes, you will wink at our efforts to destroy you, you will compete with one another for our favor."

One may wonder, in the light of the 1962 Cuban confrontation and Khrushchev's general policy of "burying" us, whether this approach has changed so very fundamentally.

A Necessary Failure

TO THE SOVIET leaders, the wheat deal is political because two very vital Soviet political interests are involved. The first is the stability of the collective agricultural system itself. Over many years, that system has failed to deliver the goods, at least insofar as the Soviet consumer is concerned. Yet to the political leadership, the collective system is essential.

A recent critical re-evaluation of the Stalinist drive for collectivization, published in Voprosy istorii, state quite categorically that the collectivist system was necessary in order to build socialism in the Soviet Union and for the defense of the country. Mounting consumer dissatisfaction with the inability of the present agricultural system to produce adequately might, over the long haul, force the Soviet leaders to revise the agricultural system. However, if the Soviet leadership finds other means of meeting domestic needs, i.e., imports paid for with gold, it can perpetuate the collectivist system.

Collectivization was abandoned in Poland and Yugoslavia because the leaderships had no way out. By importing wheat, the Soviet leadership sees a way out, and hence the wheat deal is necessary to Moscow in order to maintain its domestic system of collectivization.

Exports Political, Too

SECONDLY, the importation of wheat is necessary to the Soviet Union in order for it to meet its grain export commitments. These commitments are important to the Soviet leadership primarily for political reasons.

Last year the Soviet Union exported approximately 7.8 million tons of grain, of which wheat constituted 4.7 million tons. The list of clients shows clearly the political importance of the exports: the largest consumer was East Germany, followed successively by Czechoslovakia, Poland, Brazil and Cuba.

The restriction that President Kennedy wishes to impose on the re-exportation of American grain to these countries creates a technical impediment to such exports. The Soviet Union would not be able to ship them American wheat directly. Nonetheless, the availability of American wheat, and indeed of other Western wheat, would mean that Soviet grain itself could be exported to the countries concerned. Hence the political problem would not be resolved by the proposed restriction.

The above comments should not be construed as an argument against an American-Soviet wheat deal. They are meant to suggest, however, that this wheat deal ought to be viewed in a political perspective and that United States negotiators ought to seek political concessions from the Soviets in return.

Naturally, there would be no point in expecting fundamental concessions. For example, it would be illusory to expect a Soviet acknowledgement of our position in Berlin in return for our willingness to sell Russia some wheat; there is no political equivalence between these two interests. However, on a number of marginal issues, there is no reason why the United States should not insist on a quid pro quo.

For example, it would seem ironical for the United States to be enabling the Soviet Union to maintain its collectivized agriculture and its politically motivated grain exports and at the same time for this country to endure continued Soviet harassment in its access to Berlin. At the very least, our negotiators could insist on a clear reciprocal understanding of the technical arrangements involved in Western access.

Similarly, we could demand that the Soviets lift their travel restrictions within Russia. Indeed, a political quid pro quo should be sought in the case of other so-called nonpolitical, technical arrangements.

For many years, for reasons of political prestige and also as a precedent, the Soviet Union has been very anxious to establish direct American-Soviet air links. Perhaps there is no reason to oppose such links, but it might be preferable to negotiate about them in the context of a reciprocal Soviet willingness to meet some of our political objectives.

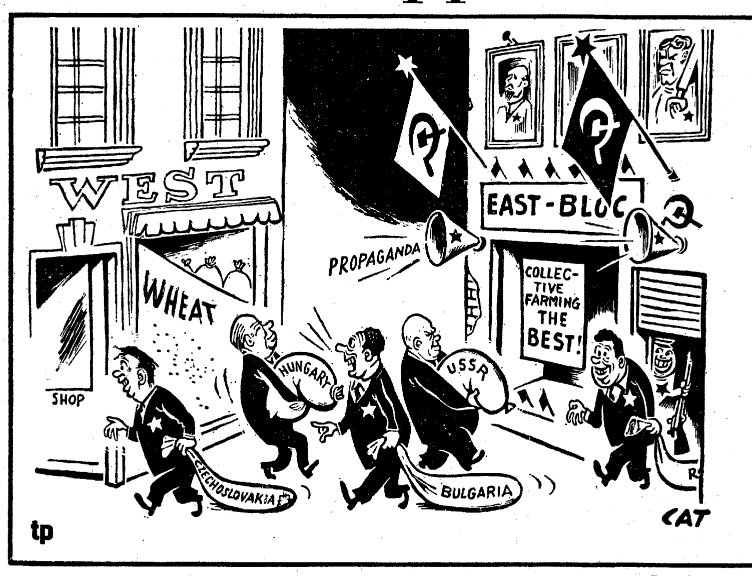
Of course, proponents of the purely "economic" approach might say that if our position is too hard, the Soviet Union will buy the wheat somewhere else. That may be true, but the argument is not entirely convincing. If the Soviet Union could easily buy wheat elsewhere, then why does it not do so?

It either wishes to deal directly with the United States because that would strengthen the impression in the West and elsewhere of an American-Soviet detente—an impression which intensifies Western European fears concerning the American position; or, conceivably, the Soviet Union does not see other markets so readily available and the American wheat is thus of some economic importance to it as well.

One may safely assume that the Soviet Union is not anxious to buy American wheat merely in order to reduce our balance of payments difficulties and to alleviate our own internal agricultural problems.

Finally, it should be stated unambiguously that it would be wrong to conclude that since the wheat deal is political, the United States should have no part of it. That is fallacious and extreme. It would be a pity if we failed to use the limited leverage that this particular situation affords.

Since the Soviet Union wishes to buy wheat from us, it puts us in a favorable bargaining position. By all means, we should go ahead with the deal, but our approach should be very conscious of its essentially political character.



Tarantel Press, Berlin

"We'll be more convincing about our superior economic system after a good meal!"